

## CHAPTER 1

# THEORISING STUDENT EXPERIENCE: STRUCTURE, AGENCY AND INEQUALITY

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### Introduction

The various national research teams in the RANLHE network brought together expertise with different perspectives, approaches, languages and cultures but there was a consensus about foregrounding the voices of students. Each country also has a unique history and developmental trajectory reflecting changing public policy priorities and the role of higher education in national economic development. Recent mass access to higher education, the expansion of qualifications and standardisation of awards are important developments, yet despite the Bologna process and the integration of higher education in Europe, existing models are both surprisingly similar and quite different in detail. This chapter outlines some of the challenges of working transnationally; some of the pitfalls we encountered and the solutions we devised; and explores how this shaped the theoretical and methodological development of the project.

## **European higher education and statistics and categories in transnational research**

Universities in Europe have been influenced by various changes that transform institutions, individuals and traditional habits of thought and behaviour (Castells 2003). These include economic globalization and new systems of management; transformation of the nation-state and forms of political and citizen participation; migrations; increased ethnic diversity; changing gender relations; as well as scientific and technological advances. All these impact upon higher education and how specific institutions respond and change depends on their social, political, economic and cultural formation and this is a complex dialectical process (González-Monteagudo 2009). Change continues apace and the recent economic crisis across much of the EU has impacted on the funding of tertiary institutions and has created a more challenging environment for non-traditional students especially in terms of fees, grants and support.

We began as a network by examining statistics on non-traditional access and retention and this exercise provided a useful example of the challenges of working transnationally. The OECD (2010) publishes retention rates for member countries for the explicit purpose of transnational comparison. Across Europe the average rates of 'survival' in HE are approximately 70 per cent - with some countries, institutions and disciplines departing significantly from those figures on the plus or negative side. This seems straightforward but

in fact the ways in which countries arrive at their statistics differ greatly. Moreover the availability of disaggregated data that allows one to discuss the access and retention of specific groups of non-traditional students varies enormously. For example the German statistics give weight to the age of the students (Heublein *et al.* 2008) but historically the Irish Higher Education Authority has produced very little data disaggregated by age except for figures which indicate the overall participation rate of mature students . In addition, national agencies use diverse terms, (non-completion, non-continuation and survival) or sometimes identical terms that are defined differently.

This is further complicated by the fact that the understanding of ‘non-traditional’ is deeply contested. Often, it means students over a particular age. The age at which one becomes a mature student varies; in Ireland the age is 23 while in Spain it is 25. Non-traditional also describes students from minority ethnic backgrounds, immigrants, working class students, people with disabilities, young mothers and early school leavers. Besides which students perceive themselves as non-traditional in ways that are very different to the system’s categories. In summary the initial period of transnational work in the RANLHE network examining statistics and different conceptions of non-traditional students revealed the complexities of international research and the problematic nature of ‘neutral’ categories in such research.

## **Working transnationally: theoretical challenges**

There were important debates amongst the RANLHE teams about how we might define non-traditional students that were indicative of different countries and the nature of mass education and the levels of inequality in participating countries. But even more challenging was the task of developing shared analytical perspectives. Team members brought various theoretical and methodological lenses to bear on the research—most notably Bourdieu (1990), critical theory (Freire 1972; Habermas 1987), psychodynamic ideas (Winnicott 1971) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1986; Mead 1934). We turn now to some of the challenges of working with these varying positions and how we developed our shared analysis.

We discovered working transnationally throws up unexpected ways of moving forward from initially divergent or even potentially divisive positionings (Merrill, 1997). Initially this was achieved by choosing a number of shared sensitizing concepts such as Bourdieu (1990) on capitals and habitus, Freire (1972) on critical pedagogy, Winnicott (1971) on transitional space and Mead (1934) on identity formation. The debates and theoretical syntheses that emerged from the project cannot be understood without giving a more precise definition of these ideas.

### ***Bourdieu, capitals and habitus***

Reay *et al.* draw heavily on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field to understand and explain student choices in higher education and summarize a number of key points;

.... the concept of habitus emphasises the enduring influence of a range of contexts, familial, peer group, institutional and class culture, and their subtle, often indirect, but still pervasive influence on (HE) choices. It foregrounds the power of implicit and tacit expectations, affective responses and aspects of cultural capital such as confidence and entitlement, often marginalised in academic research.

(2005: 27)

These authors show how 'traditional' entrants are in Bourdieu's terms 'fish in water'. Their higher education choices and careers are a result of living out 'normal' biographies that are 'linear, anticipated and predictable, unreflexive transitions, often gender and class specific, rooted in well-established lifeworlds' (Reay *et al.* 2005: 33). In contrast, students from non-traditional backgrounds - such as working class and ethnic minority students - encounter higher education as an unfamiliar field and are 'fish out of water'. The argument is that their higher education choices (and careers) are heavily influenced by early socialization and that social experience becomes embodied and part of one's practical sense of the world.

Reay *et al.* (2005: 28-34) argue that when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate change and transformation but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty. A sociocultural approach further highlights the importance of 'institutional habitus' where organizational cultures are reproduced by the value given to particular social and cultural capitals, usually to benefit the middle classes (Stuart *et al.* 2007: 171).

Thomas, who also draws on Bourdieu and Reay *et al.* states that;

...if an institutional habitus is inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritise or valorise one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity and difference ...students from diverse backgrounds will find greater acceptance of and respect for their own practices and knowledge, and this in turn will promote higher levels of persistence in HE.

(2002: 431)

The German team (Alheit 1982, 2002) looked at how a person's habitus and their experience of learning is shaped by their biography, the composition and volume of social, cultural and economic capital and the symbolic and intellectual capital of a particular university. This process produces a range of educational biographies as the individual habitus responds to and copes in different ways with the habitus of the university. Both the

person's biography and the context of the university are important in shaping the learning experience and the likelihood of a student succeeding or not. They identified how different educational biographies are shaped by distinct milieus and how this is linked to certain trajectories in social space.

### *Critical Theory and Freire*

Our second set of ideas is more generally known as critical theory which challenges and critiques dominant ideologies:

Critical theory offers a means of using individual stories and whole biographies to understand and explain how uninterrogated yet oppressive scripts, alongside harsh material realities, can shape what people say or do. Critical theory helps us to understand that, although biographies are individual, they are redolent with the collective: people share common experiences of class and gender inequalities.

(Merrill and West 2009: 68).

Critical theory stems from the Marxist tradition and the Frankfurt School. Critical in this context means that theory is used in order to understand and have a practical intent; to change the conditions in which people are prevented from flourishing. A critical theory identifies activities and processes that are taken for granted and the interests of those who

invest in them; it attends to power relations and inequalities that are a consequence of institutional functioning. And finally, it is interested in resistance and transformative action in unjust situations (Zeichner 1985).

The Ireland team's theoretical position was largely informed by critical theory (Habermas 1987) and the related field of critical pedagogy. Freire's idea of common knowledge (Bell *et al.* 1990) was utilized to underline the idea that adults arrive in university packed full of knowledge (Murphy and Fleming 2013). However, the knowledge is subjective, experience based and frequently anecdotal. In contrast, the university offers objective, theoretical and generalized knowledge. In the epistemological fault lines between these forms of knowledge power differentials between student and the academy are worked out - mostly through the university winning the battle for dominance. The examination and marking system are the fora for this conflict. As a way of transcending this situation Freire suggests that students have a right to know what they know already, but in a different way and teaching then involves:

...going beyond the common sense of the people, with the people. My quest is not to go alone but to go with the people. Then having a certain scientific understanding of how the structures of society work, I can go beyond the common-sense understanding of how the society works – not to stay at this level but, starting from this, to go beyond. Theory does that.



(Bell, *et al.* 1990: 101)

When students arrive they bring with them their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge, which they got by living. Freire puts it this way:

They do not arrive empty. They arrive full of things...they bring with them their knowledge at the level of common sense, and they have the right to go beyond this level of knowledge. ...This is a right that the people have, and I call it the right to know better what they already know. (Bell *et al.* 1990: 157)

Knowing better means going beyond common sense in order to discover the reason for the facts.

### ***Transitional space and psychoanalysis***

West (1996), using a biographical approach (Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000), illustrated the complexity of learning and how vocational motivation could be rooted in deeply personal concerns, influenced by the power of instrumental ideology in the wider culture. Given an opportunity to revisit their auto/biographies participants could become more aware of how much they might have rationalized their motivation in terms dictated by powerful cultural narratives (getting a better job) to the neglect of more personal issues (a sense of educational failure or under-achievement). The nature of the stories people tell, and the interplay of ideology and personal narratives becomes a prime focus in this work because

the learner is conceived to be both the main character and author of a life (West *et al.* 2007). This approach is attuned to issues of emotion, experience, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, unconscious processes and the incorporation of the researcher's subjectivity in the research. It also suggests sensitivity to cultural, social and political contexts in which the research is taking place is important.

West has developed a psychosocial perspective on learning and non-traditional learners (West 1996; Merrill and West 2009). Drawing on the work of Winnicott (1971), he characterizes higher education as a transitional space in which there is a constant negotiation and renegotiation of self in relationship to others and the cultural world of the university. Basic questions may be asked on entering university, about who a person is, has been and might want to be. This in turn may provoke anxiety about a capacity to cope with change or whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, e.g., other students or tutors.

West also chronicles how transitional space may be claimed in higher education and how a stronger sense of self forged in the process, not least with the help of new relationships, such as the good teacher. Students can also draw on new discourses - such as feminism - and, in interaction with others, begin to compose alternative and less self-disparaging narratives, creating, in effect, new kinds of psychosocial capital.

### ***Identity formation and learning***

The Swedish partners brought an understanding of identity development based on the work of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1986) and understood that an identity is socially constructed, reconstructed in interaction with others and is connected with the shared view that identity is formed in interaction between structure and agency (Giddens 1984). This team defined learning as the process of forming an identity achieved through communication in the interaction between the individual subject and significant and generalized others (Blumer 1986). Use was made of the concept of ‘floating’ identity to understand how some learners attempted to navigate the range of backgrounds, experiences and dislocations on their journey through HE (Bron 2000; Edström and Thunborg 2010).

### **Debate and theoretical development**

The discussion and application of sensitizing concepts provided space for exchange, debate and theoretical development. Over time the resources of Feminism, Pragmatism, Critical Theory and Bourdieu’s theory of practice were developed in various ways and the stock of these concepts was added to in response to emerging findings. This allowed for new meanings and theorizations to emerge. For example the team from Scotland (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010) worked with the ideas of Bourdieu and transitional space in relation

to Vic Turner's (1987) concept of 'liminality' that describes social spaces that are 'betwixt and between' the more fixed and imposed social roles of childhood and adult life. This allowed them to describe university as a space of experimentation related to imagined futures. The Polish team drew on a long and evolving tradition of biographical research in Poland and worked with socio-cultural theories of learning and the sensitizing concepts to develop a theoretical approach concerned above all with the sources of agency and accurately mapping transitions in learner identity.

A fundamental tension among the teams was whether to focus primarily on social issues or mainly on the individual and the self, albeit a self is located in a socio-cultural context. This provoked a good deal of discussion. This drew on longstanding debates in the social sciences about how social and cultural structures impact, or even determine, agency or whether agency is paramount. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and structure refers to the recurrent patterned arrangements that impinge on and seem to limit the choices and opportunities one has. The theoretical position of each team carried an answer to this question. Traditional critical theorists are usually more inclined to look to social structures and Marx was strongest in asserting the primacy of material forces in determining consciousness. However, despite marked differences all agreed that it was not in the either/or posing of the question that an answer was to be found but the interaction between structure and agency which was important. Bourdieu sees structure and agency (field and practice) as complementary forces (1990) and is interested in the dialectical process of 'externalizing the internal' and 'internalizing the external'

(1977), and Habermas (1987) addresses this in the discussion of system and lifeworld. Symbolic interactionism strongly supports the capacity of individuals to construct and reconstruct their worlds. In many modern approaches the emphasis on the either/or is seen as misplaced and 'Social life is conducted in and through patterns of collaborative interaction: sociologically, our interest is not in the subjectivity of individuals but in the ways in which intersubjectivity is achieved and maintained' (Martin and Dennis 2010: 7).

Ultimately common ground was found as teams worked through the data, in discussions of general findings and use of case studies. A consensus emerged as to how the psychosocial problem might be addressed; how the interests in psychosocial perspectives would be integrated. Through the data and the discussion we developed a shared interest in the resilience of students and learner identity (i.e. the way students see themselves as learners, the way they engage with life experiences including the realities of HE as it unfolds over a course). Learner identity also includes the attitudes and beliefs and confidence of the students and their ability to learn. Identities are the 'tools that users construct to represent themselves' (Girbau and Gubern 2013: 64). In fact identities are forged in interactions between students and the contexts in which they act and are expected to perform. All research teams saw identity as relational, forged and supported in the communicative environments of higher education (Kolb and Kolb, 2010). One's learner identity can be either fixed and rigid or hopefully one that is more critical, systematic, creative and above all open and in pursuit of new knowledge and ways of being more human (see Freire 1972).

We turn now to these positions before discussing how they were brought to a shared psychosocial positioning concerning data collection and analysis.

### **Honneth: a psychosocial theory of structure, agency and identity**

Axel Honneth (1995a, 2007) offered one important way forward and acted as a bridge between differing positions in the team discussions over how best to conceptualize structure and agency from a psychosocial perspective which took account of what the students were saying (Fleming and Finnegan, 2010). The fact that Honneth (1995a: 254-267) built significantly on Mead's and Winnicott's work was also helpful in that it allowed various teams to build an analysis along shared if not identical paths. Honneth's work has been applied to good effect as a way of understanding learning in HE as relational (Murphy and Brown 2012). The central insight of Habermas and others that human development can only be achieved intersubjectively is expanded by Honneth to emphasize the key role of recognition and respect in this process.

Honneth's recent work amounts to an ambitious project to reconfigure and reanimate critical theory. He argues that the purpose of critical philosophy is to investigate social problems in their historical context with emancipatory intent. He asserts that the project of emancipatory philosophy has to be entirely reimagined. His solution is to foreground a theory of intersubjectivity and believes the 'struggle for recognition' is the crucial mooring

point for future efforts in critical theory. He argues that the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee (1995b: 92). So in order for humans to achieve a productive relationship with themselves (an identity) humans require an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements. This is the foundation of moral consciousness and of society as a whole and one develops a morality in the context of the reactions (positive and negative) one receives from another human being in the struggle for recognition. Honneth argues that the struggle for recognition, based on both the fundamental need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, also explains social development. 'It is by the way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups-their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition-that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds' (Honneth 1995b: 93).

Honneth argues that there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society, the development of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and historical evolution of capitalism and modernity. Each social sphere is defined by the different forms of recognition needs and expectations. Recognition, a simultaneously individual and social need, requires love in the immediate interpersonal sphere by the 'singular needy subject' for the development of self-confidence; the recognition of the autonomous rights bearing person in law offers the basis for self-respect; and the successful formation of a co-

operative member of society whose efforts are socially valued is necessary to build self-esteem (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 161). The significance of this for interpreting non-traditional experience will be more fully addressed in chapter 3 and 4.

This connects inequality with disrespect and equality with respect and recognition. It allows researchers to connect their interest in the psychological with an understanding of how this is connected to more social concerns. It allows for the inclusion of ideas based on the traditional understanding that the personal is political and then adds the understanding that the political is personal.

If this is so the implications are significant as it raises the possibility that those personal, interpersonal and interactive moments of the higher education experience are both that (personal) and profoundly political. Teaching in HE becomes both an interpersonal activity and when infused with recognition it becomes developmental and an experience of social justice and care. The importance given to relationality in the student narratives requires concepts that foreground this in the theorization of both inequality and student agency.

### **The importance of intersectionality**



In working transnationally we wanted to move beyond static and putatively neutral categories of access and retention and the research network was committed to foregrounding students' voices and their experience. In listening to the voices the intersectionality of inequality became a very important empirical theme. Theories of intersectionality first emerged from feminists concerned with praxis, subjectivity and the politics of knowledge and is the study of ways in which various exclusions and disadvantage interact and thus compound exclusions. Repeatedly over the course of the study the students' narratives forced us to consider the intersection of inequalities. First studied by Crenshaw (1991) who originally studied how black women were subject to exclusions based on race and gender and on how gender and race interacted. If social class and sexuality are added to the interacting inequalities, the understanding of inequality becomes more complex and complete. Studying a topic intersectionally involves questioning the categories in which subjects are viewed. This research included factors of class, gender, ethnicity, age and disability, For instance a woman with a disability who is in addition part of an ethnic minority may experience triple inequality. This highlights the multidimensional matrix of inequality and allows us highlight the easily forgotten differences or similarities across groups (Cole, 2009: 176).

For our purposes, as we cannot elaborate here on the full complexities of this concept (McCall 2005), we can say that it provides ways in which inequality can be more effectively researched and better understood. The ways in which one group of non-traditional students is excluded may be connected structurally with ways in which others

are likewise disadvantaged. It is crucial in research on non-traditional students to be attentive to how disability, gender, social class, race and ethnicity may be connected or distinct in an individual's biography.

It is useful to state the implications of taking this approach. It means mapping inequalities in a matrix of interconnected exclusions and understand how non-traditional students face a linked set of systemic exclusions based on gender, race, social class and ethnic background (Ritzer 2007: 204). For instance, a comparative study of mature students, if not studied intersectionally, may prevent us from perceiving mature students who are women and with a disability are disadvantaged in different (or similar) ways in other countries or institutions.

## **Conclusion**

A critical and pragmatic approach to intersubjectivity was the shared analytical solution of the research teams. This allowed us to link to broader debates about individual action (of students) and social structures in the (critical) social sciences. This chapter outlined how differing and potentially divergent theoretical perspectives informed the research team. A well-grounded way forward was offered in two ways that are also consistent with intersectionality theory: 1) to find agreed bridging theories as in this case with Honneth's

work and 2) to see the various theoretical perspectives as offering valid but multiple perspectives that are a strength as the issues being researched can be understood in various ways. The question arises then as to how understandings from different perspectives enhance the theoretical sensitivity of the research. Working on international teams equally allows the researchers to see issues from these multiple perspectives and this adds value to understanding in ways consistent with intersectionality theory. Finally, the even more contentious issues concerning how various international partners approach research methodology is enhanced by examining ways in which the different methods are complementary and interconnected rather than contradictory, divergent and incapable of being brought together to support common findings. The ideas from Honneth allowed a number of shared positions on the teams to find ways of bridging different approaches so that the social and psychological are connected and integrated in a dialectical way.. The process of transnational research also somewhat unintended validation of feminist proposals about intersectionality and reflection on the relationship between individual action and social structures in higher education.

Finally, we know, or have learned rather, that it is possible to work internationally and that different perspectives and positioning are a strength in Europe. They allow us to know not only more about Europe's non-traditional students but know our own country's non-traditional students in a different way. The following chapters will expand on some of the issues raised here.

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